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“Der Sinn des Krieges”

Politische Ziele und militärische Instrumente der kriegführenden Parteien von 1914-1918

This conference, which took place between Thursday 21 and Saturday 23 March 2013 at the Historisches Kolleg in Munich, brought together a selection of internationally renowned scholars to discuss the war aims and strategies of many of the belligerent nations during the First World War. The conference was organized by Holger Afflerbach (Leeds) and Elisabeth Hüls (Historisches Kolleg). Through a series of chaired discussions and keynote addresses the conference sought to draw together the separate, national approaches to the consideration of war aims, and create a forum in which a more comparative, international, collaborative discussion of the topic could take place. As noted by Afflerbach in his introduction to the conference, the questions surrounding war aims and strategies are myriad and complex, whilst the aims and strategies themselves were subject to change as the war developed. Internal and external pressures, combined with the magnitude of events, produced a conflagration of previously unimagined scale and duration. The conference sought to examine the responses offered by politicians and military personnel alike to some of these key questions: how were coherent strategies developed by the belligerents? What actions did the political and military elites take in order to establish a consensus of national opinion? What were the political leaders actually able to do as events continued to unfold, both before and during the war? What alternative strategies were available to them? And finally, why did the war continue for as long as it did? Why didn't it stop?

It was with these questions in mind that the first panel of the conference took place, with Georges-Henri Soutou (Sorbonne) and Keith Jeffery (Queen's, Belfast) examining France and Britain respectively. For Soutou, the military plans created by Joffre in the immediate pre-war period were not merely a reflection of the 'offensive cult' gripping military commanders of the time, but a response to the ambitious political aims of the French state. Alongside the reclamation of Alsace-Lorraine, France aimed for the separation of the industrial Saar region and the Rhineland from German influence, in conjunction with similar Russian aims in the east. These goals, to diminish German economic power and develop French industrial potential, were

intrinsically linked to French military strategy in the early years of the war, a strategy which advocated successive attempts to 'break through' the German lines and secure the decisive victory on the battlefield. When this did not occur – the Nivelle offensive of 1917 being the final attempt – the army slipped into mutiny and the military strategy passed from the offensive to the defensive; wait for the Americans and the tanks, and attempt to gain a negotiated peace with Vienna to isolate Germany. In conjunction with the collapse of the Russian war effort, this saw a shift in French political considerations away from the pre-war entente with Russia and towards, in 1918, an 'Atlantic alliance' with Britain and the United States.

Jeffery also considered the issue of alliance in his paper – this time between the British government and the Dominions – with a discussion upon the developing influence of imperial interests over British war aims. Although, as Jeffery noted, the break-up of the British Empire has led to the promotion of 'nationalized' narratives of the British war effort – the emphasis upon the role of ANZAC troops at Gallipoli despite the larger numbers of English troops a notable example – the most significant pre-war discussion over Britain's war strategy was a purely British affair. At the CID meeting in August 1911, the Dominions were not invited and not made aware of the conclusions of the meeting, Britain's continental commitment to the despatch of the BEF to France. In 1914 the Dominions were again reduced to the role of spectators, one that continued until the appointment of an Imperial War Cabinet by Lloyd George in 1917. Echoing the earlier discussion, Jeffery demonstrated that developments during the war led to a change in British considerations. As the French had become increasingly 'Atlantic' in their focus as the conflict continued, the British outlook became more imperial as the war went on and the manpower of the Dominions became more and more important. The final outcome of this policy would be the representation of the Dominions both as part of the British Empire, and as 'small powers' in their own right at Versailles.

Hew Strachan's (Oxford) keynote speech, which followed, concentrated upon the relationships between the politicians and military leaders responsible for creating the aims and strategies for which they would go to war, the basis for the post-war 'battle of the memoirs' from which many of the First World War's controversies were generated. Working from Clausewitz's warning about

the 'encroachment' of politics upon the military, Strachan demonstrated how the term 'strategy' was understood differently by military leaders prior to the war, disconnecting the operational plans of armies from those of national, government-formulated policy. This led to a divergence between military *means* and political *ends* during the conflict, resulting in political leaders on both sides attempting – or not – to gain control over the higher direction of the war efforts of the belligerents as the fighting developed. France and Britain, under Clemenceau and Lloyd George respectively, were evidence of the former, Germany under Ludendorff and Hindenburg evidence of the latter. The increased co-ordination of the allied effort in 1918 presented a blueprint for an institutional framework that could, in future, combine the political, diplomatic and military discussions required for the generation of a convergent policy.

The opening session on Friday focused upon the opportunities for the Central Powers to bring about a negotiated peace, with Roger Chickering (Georgetown) and Marvin Fried (London School of Economics) discussing Germany and Austria-Hungary respectively. Chickering concentrated upon four 'moments' in the course of the war which demonstrated the enormous political and strategic obstacles which prevailed on the German side to a negotiated resolution of the war. Starting with von Falkenhayn and Bethmann Hollweg's dispute at the end of 1914, through the Bethmann Hollweg peace offer of December 1916, Chickering highlighted that both civil *and* military leaders erected barriers to peace negotiations in different periods, leading to a situation in which the idea of a compromise peace was unable to gain popular traction until after the military situation had deteriorated to beyond the point at which the enemy were likely to agree to a lenient settlement. Germany had entered the war with broad popular support as part of the 'moral bargain' between the state and society. Following the heavy losses of the opening months a compromise peace was only *politically* acceptable when both sides could claim victory. The situation on the fighting fronts ensured that such circumstances did not arise.

Whilst Chickering demonstrated that German political and military leaders were open to negotiations at differing periods in the conflict, Fried exposed the aggressive, expansionist and inflexible war aims which drove Austria-Hungary to continue fighting in the face of an increasingly bleak military situation. Unlike in Germany, successive Foreign Ministers retained the decision-

making process for the civil authorities, and ultimately gambled the very existence of Austria-Hungary upon the possibility of significant post-war increases in the power, prestige, influence and territory of the Empire within the Balkans. As Fried illustrated, Austria-Hungarian inflexibility – which continued until the domestic food situation became truly disastrous – was a source of great opposition between Austria-Hungary and her coalition partners, and was a significant factor in prolonging the war. By continuing to fight on, Austria-Hungary prevented the isolation of Germany and further increased the probability that final defeat would result in the demise and dismemberment of the Dual Monarchy itself.

The collapse of a monarchy was also the focus of Boris Kolonitskii's (St. Petersburg) paper, the first of Friday's second session. Kolonitskii discussed the role of public opinion in influencing the strategies adopted by Russia's civil and military elite during the war. The 'democratization' of the Tsar's image (wearing military uniform, visiting the front line and munitions factories) was met with an ambivalent reaction within Russia itself, an ambivalence also noticeable within the motives of those behind the February Revolution of 1917. Some of those involved wanted a revolution in order to stop the war, others wished to depose the Tsar in order to continue the war in a more efficient manner. It was this government, composed of actors with very different attitudes to the war, which supplied the back drop to Russia's offensive of July 1917. The offensive was 'sold' to the soldier's committees by the Socialist Revolutionary Minister for War and 'persuader-in-chief' Alexander Kerensky; it was a suicidal action for such a poorly equipped and morally bereft force. However, as Kolonitskii emphasized, the soldiers did vote for the offensive, and they did take part, further evidence that public opinion continued to play a vital role in the military strategy pursued by Russia until their final exit from the conflict.

Rather than focus upon offensive action, in the second paper of the session Dušan Bataković (Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences) presented the military strategy of Serbia in the opening month of the conflict as purely defensive, a corollary of Serbia's losses in the Balkan Wars and lack of preparation for fighting a major campaign in August 1914. Bataković sought to explain Serbian war aims within the context of Serbian-Austria-Hungarian relations in the decades prior to the outbreak of war. To Serbians, the Dual Monarchy represented a colonial ruler, with

discriminatory attitudes towards the Serbs. The Serbs on the other hand, led by the enigmatic Prime Minister Nikola Pašić, were committed to democracy and, following the military successes of 1914, the unification of Serbia with the South Slavs from the Yugoslav provinces of Austria-Hungary. This policy would bring Serbia into conflict with Italy, they themselves having territorial ambitions in the Adriatic, but would be maintained in spite of the crushing defeat of the Serbian Army by the combined might of the German, Austria-Hungarian and Bulgarian forces in November 1915. As with their 'colonial rulers', Serbian war aims were consistent and inflexible. Compromise was not an option for either side, leading to the war of mutual extinction that would both cause great suffering to the peoples of Serbia and Austria-Hungary and, eventually, destroy the Dual Monarchy, bringing about the creation of the Yugoslav state that Pašić had demanded in the opening months of the war.

Focus remained in the Balkans for the first paper of Friday's session, as Oliver Schulz (Paris) discussed the subject of Bulgaria's war aims. As with Serbia, for Bulgaria the First World War was not viewed as an isolated conflict, but rather as a continuation of the Balkan Wars. Nationalist tendencies prevalent in Sofia in the aftermath of the Second Balkan War influenced Bulgaria's territorial ambitions, a return to the borders of Bulgaria as defined by the Treaty of San Stefano in 1878. Using these guidelines as a 'bargaining tool', the Bulgarian Prime Minister aimed to play off both the Entente and the Central Powers in order to maximize Bulgarian gains, preferably without fighting. The key location was Macedonia. The Central Powers could offer Bulgaria full control, the Entente – due to Serbian claims on the area – could not. Atrocities towards the civilian population of the enemy were a common feature of the fighting, itself a legacy of the Balkan Wars, and irregular units had operated on the Serbian-Bulgarian borderland both prior to Bulgaria's official entry into the war and after the war had ended. Within this environment, German strategic influence was limited. Bulgarian commanders questioned and delayed the implementation of Mackensen's plans, whilst the removal of resources for German and Austria-Hungarian use led to great resentment among Bulgarian troops. Clearly, from Schulz's paper, problems of coalition warfare were common to both sides and suggest a new appreciation of inter-allied relationships is necessary

John Gooch's (Leeds) paper also assessed the aims and strategy of a 'latecomer', in this case Italy. As in Bulgaria, Gooch demonstrated that the Italian political situation at the outbreak of war played a pivotal role in Italy's war aims, in the decision to join the Entente and, crucially, in the military strategy pursued by the military upon entry. Just three people were responsible for Italian policy: the Prime Minister Antonio Salandra, the Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino, and King Vittorio Emanuele III. Strategy on the other hand, was solely under the control of Luigi Cadorna. The Italians expected to fight a war which would enhance Italy's position and weaken that of Austria-Hungary. Following their entry however, Italy became increasingly involved in a 'total' war fought for limited ends. A lack of political unity and military alternatives to Cadorna led to successive operations on the Isonzo, resulting in a failure to break the deadlock and culminating in the disaster of Caporetto in November 1917. Not only did Caporetto lead to the removal of Cadorna and the promotion of the cautious Armando Diaz, but also to the creation of the Supreme War Council and an attempt at increased military co-operation and unified strategy within the Entente during 1918. Despite Diaz's victory at Vittorio Veneto however, the changing nature of the 'diplomatic game' over the previous three years of intense war had created an international environment in which the aims Italy had desired at the outset were no longer attainable.

But were Italy's, or indeed any of the belligerents', war aims really all that important? This was the central question addressed by Lothar Höbelt's (Vienna) paper which concluded the Friday session of the conference. Taking as his starting point the post-war polemic against imperialist, expansionist war aims, Höbelt illustrated that, when compared to the wars of unification in the nineteenth century, the war aims pursued in the First World War were actually very moderate. Compared to the ambitions of Napoleon before, and Hitler after, the Great Powers barely re-drew the European map in the aftermath of the war. Furthermore, war aims 'wobbled about' in the endless friction of international relations, internal struggles and changes in public attitudes as the war developed. Therefore, Höbelt argued, the concentration on post-war considerations of war aims tell only part of the story: war aims were far more important *during* the war as an influence on the means to bring about the desired end, rather than *after*

the war, when the debate over war aims led to a perception of the war's outcome that was vastly different to the reality.

The final session of the conference saw Klaus Schwabe (Aachen) and Mesut Uyar (New South Wales) present on the topics of the United States and the Ottoman Empire respectively. Schwabe's paper focused upon the role of Woodrow Wilson, both as Commander-in-Chief of the US Army and as America's political decision maker. Wilson's belief in the power of democracy to promote a peaceful international system after the war led to a requirement for the autocratic monarchies of the Central Powers to be removed, either by military force or domestic agitation. Therefore, the policy of 'regime change' in Germany was both an aim and consistent rationale behind American actions in the war, culminating in Wilson's refusal to recognize Prince Maximilian of Baden as the legitimate German leader in October 1918. Wilson's demand for democracy – defined as a government that the people would like and would defend – led to the prolongation of the conflict as, until the final weeks of the war, there was not a significant enough anti-government movement within Germany to engender the change Wilson requested.

Uyar's paper, the final paper of the conference, returned to the theme of coalition with regard to the subordination of the Ottoman Empire to German influence, not least in the roles of Generals von Schellendorf and von Seeckt as German chiefs of the Ottoman General Staff. Both played a key role in the formulation and application of Ottoman military strategy during the war, yet their contribution has been overshadowed by concentration on the towering figures of Enver Pasha, Liman von Sanders and Erich von Falkenhayn. Uyar demonstrated how Turkish troops benefited from training in German tactical methods, particular in the 1920s, but at the same time found their limited resources eroded by the failure of German-led expeditions towards Afghanistan and Iran. As an agricultural economy, the Ottoman Empire was not geared towards the particular requirements of industrial warfare, however, as Uyar demonstrated, the Turks were able to sacrifice territory for time during the conflict and – as highlighted by Ottoman-German friction over Georgia – the relationship between the two allies was not as prescriptive as has previously been considered.

Following a stimulating and exhaustive set of papers, Afflerbach offered a summary of the conference, highlighting the key factors to be considered in the volume to be created from the presentations. Each nation claimed that they needed their war aims to be met to justify the sacrifices being made across various fronts, the existence of coalitions with differing aims and the ambivalent, difficult to assess nature of 'public support' for the war added a further level of resistance to a compromise peace. It was this combination of deep and complex political problems that led to the continuation of the conflict, the easiest way out of the chaos was to fight on until victory. The only way to pay for the 'financial catastrophe' was to win on the battlefield and pass on the bill to the defeated. The 'hard line' approaches of those seeking total victory – Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Ludendorff the key figures – reinforced the stance of their opponents and helped refuel increasingly weary nations, the fear of defeat and submission to the enemy was a significant galvanizing tool.

The outcome of the conference is to be a collection of essays based upon the topics addressed by each of the speakers, edited by Afflerbach under the title *The Purpose of War. War Aims and Strategy during the Great War* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2014). As the breadth of the papers summarized above illustrates, the collection will be a comprehensive, transnational volume seeking to understand how the belligerents constructed aims and the extent to which the military strategies they adopted were connected to those political aims and the limitations of coalition warfare requiring the assistance of separate sovereign nations each with their own, sometimes contradictory aims. However, as recognized in the discussion between delegates and contributors, the presented papers had seen somewhat more significant analysis of aims rather than strategies. The contributors agreed to rectify this imbalance for the published volume.

If they are able to do so, then there can be little doubt that the forthcoming volume will supply an important and necessary contribution to the ongoing debate over civil-military relations during the First World War.